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JAMES GATES PERCIVAL





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JAMES GATES PERCIVAL

An Anecdotal Sketch and  
a Bibliography

BY HENRY E. LEGLER

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*But who is he with modest looks  
And clad in homely russet-brown?  
He murmurs near the running brooks  
A music sweeter than their own.  
He is retired as noon-tide dew,  
Or fountain in a noon-day grove;  
And you must love him ere to you  
He will seem worthy of your love.  
The outward shows of sky and earth,  
Of hill and valley, he has viewed;  
And impulses of deeper birth  
Have come to him in solitude.  
In common things that round us lie  
Some random truths he can impart,  
The harvest of a quiet eye,  
That broods and sleeps on his own heart.  
—Wordsworth.*

## I

Except to a few special collectors and students of early American literature, the books of James Gates Percival are to-day unknown; his name, which forty years ago was linked with Bryant's, is known scarcely better than are his books—affording another illustration that fame based on contemporary judgment rests on shifting sand.

With the exception of Edgar Allan Poe, no American poet has a life story so charged with the elements that evoke intense pity. Here the analogy ends; both were unfortunate and bitterly unhappy, but from widely different causes. Poe was sensuous, passionate, degenerate; Percival lived a life of singular purity. With a heart aching for human sympathy, he lived his whole life apart from his fellows, "wrapped in the solitude of his own originality." Naturally he became eccentric and misanthropic. He sought to end his life at the age of 25, and his poem on the

subject of suicide embodies the train of thought that furnished the motive. He lived to be 60 years of age, and the publication of his first book was the one brief period of the three score years which seemed to him worth the living. Female companionship he sought once, and ever after avoided almost frantically; comradeship he repelled; companionship, except that of books, he avoided. When he built his house, it had no door and no windows in front; the only entrance was in the rear, and visitors never succeeded by any pretense in crossing the threshold. Sensitive shy, his erratic manners and strange apparel served to attract attention to him. Miserably poor all his days, he must often have suffered for the necessities of life. He might have been a prosperous country physician, as his father was before him, but he abandoned the medical profession after his first case, preferring the slender income and drudgery of a writer's life. Often he would, as he has himself described it in a letter that is unusually communicative, "go home with weary knees to a supperless cottage and feast on moonshine." During one trying year of penury his income from literary employment, which was his sole resource, amounted to sixty-

five dollars. His experiences seem to have inculcated no prudent habits of thrift; when fortune momentarily smiled upon him, once or twice, his entire cash capital and the limit of his credit were exchanged in a lump for packages of books. He was thus continually struggling with financial difficulties. He left a remarkable library of ten thousand volumes, which was disposed of at auction. Even after the lapse of nearly fifty years, the bookhunter occasionally finds a volume in some bookstall bearing on the fly-leaf the characteristic autograph of its former owner:

*J. H. Percival*

## II

No doubt physical causes contributed largely to the eccentricities of James Gates Percival. He was a precocious child who inherited from his mother a sensitive, nervous temperament. "To overcome his timidity, his father once put him on horseback and rode with him into a sham fight. It threw the sensitive lad into convulsions."

How great an influence this incident exerted upon Percival's after life may be judged from the strangeness of it. In his will he bequeathed in case his mother did not survive him, all his personal property to the Medical Society of Connecticut, "to be employed in paying a prize or prizes for the best dissertation or dissertations on the best means and method of the physical and physico-moral education of children from the earliest infancy, so as to form the soundest constitution and the best regulated habits."



Alas! He had nothing to leave except debts and books!

In his first volume of poems, he wrote: "Perhaps some apology may be demanded for *The Suicide*. I can only say that it is intended as a picture of the horror and wretchedness of a youth ruined by early perversion, and of the causes of that perversion. It is not without a moral to those who can see it. I wish to impress upon the minds of all who read it the great danger of indulging the evil propensities, or tampering with the feelings of children."

### III

Opinions may differ as to the merits of Percival's poetry. Of the value of his scientific and philological services there can be no question. In studying the geology of Connecticut, he traveled afoot, passing along one side of each of the 5000 square miles of the state. He completed eleven manuscript volumes, amounting to nearly 1500 pages, very finely written in abbreviation. He collected specimens from at least 8000 localities, each specimen intended to illustrate something peculiar and noticed in the notes—all specimens being marked on the papers enclosing them, and checked in the note-books, so that he could again trace them to the exact spot where he found them.<sup>1</sup>

At daybreak the indefatigable geologist was on his way, munching a bit of bread. From dusk to midnight he wrote his notes and marked his

1. Report to Gov. Baldwin.

specimens. The state of Connecticut paid him a miserly pittance for this work; in Wisconsin he fared much better as state geologist.

#### IV

Many anecdotes have been told of Percival. They give, better than any formal sketch of his life, the key to his character. Those which are here retold are gathered together from many sources. His brother Ossin and the pastor of Kensington parish are authorities for stories of his childhood. As a young boy he took solitary walks across the fields, never entering into the sports of other boys. Shy and shrinking, he never resented injuries heaped upon him by his school associates, avoiding them as much as possible. He crept, "like a snail, unwillingly to school," but in books he was eagerly interested. He had a remarkable memory, and an imaginative cast of mind. His greatest amusement was to visit the margin of a little stream and on the sand construct maps of kingdoms he had become interested in, marking places and boundaries with pebbles.

Abnormally sensitive, pain felt by any creature distressed him exceedingly. He was sent, in boyhood, on a horseback journey to relatives in Vermont. He had not gone far when the horse's back became sore beneath the saddle; he dismounted at once, took off the saddle, placed it upon his own shoulders, and led his horse home.

When he was made state geologist of Wisconsin, a young man was appointed to assist him. One day he entered the governor's office in a state of excitement.

"I can not stand it; indeed I can not; I can not work with him any longer," he declared in some agitation, referring to his assistant.

"What's the trouble?"

"He whistles and he throws stones at birds," was the indignant rejoinder.

Thereafter he pursued his geological labors unassisted.

"In the last two years of his college," relates Dr. J. H. Barnes, "he roomed in the fourth story and northwest corner of what is now called Old South-Middle College. The rooms were then, as now, largely inhabited by rats and mice that had fashioned doors of entrance in every corner, and one of these they killed; but Perci-

val was so overcome by the thought of taking the life of a living creature that he mourned its loss as if it had been a human being. He was morbidly sensitive to pain, and he used to say that he felt as if he were made of glass, and should tumble in pieces if anyone touched him."

## V

If he had not great talent as a musician, Percival had certainly a remarkable sense of melody. Concerning his learning to use the accordion, the following story is told:<sup>2</sup> “He remarked to a friend that he should like to get some cheap musical instrument with which to amuse himself occasionally; and after several had been suggested and objected to on various grounds, the accordion, then a comparatively new instrument, was mentioned. ‘What,’ said Percival, ‘that affair like a bellows; can any music be got out of that?’ On being assured that there could, the thing seemed to strike him favorably, and he procured one that same day. On the following day, toward night, his informant was passing the place where he had his rooms, and heard music of an unusual character. On inquiry, he learned that it was Percival and the accordion. He had

2. Putnam's Monthly, December, 1856.

spent the whole night in the effort, and had mastered the instrument. 'Never,' said the narrator, 'have I before or since heard such music from an accordion.' "

It was while he was a student at Yale that Percival became interested in music. Mr. Richard Storrs Willis, a fellow student and a fellow member of the Sing-Song Club, saw much of him at this time. Mr. Willis subsequently became connected with the Musical World, and contributed some interesting anecdotes of him to this journal.

"I recollect on one occasion," relates Mr. Willis, "our club was to sing at a little gathering of friends, and Percival, quite to our astonishment, had consented to accompany us,—for he had shunned all general society for years. Still more were we astonished when he expressed his willingness, while there, to sing a song of his own. He had brought his accordion. In a retired corner of the room sat his gaunt, thin figure, bent over the instrument. To me he had never looked half so weird-like; that noble Shakespearian head of his, the sharply cut, spiritual features, his eyes so full of the wild fire of genius, the thin, curling locks,—all gave



him the appearance of a minstrel come down from another age.

“We had already quieted the room for the expected song. Standing near him, I soon knew, by the motion of his lips, that he was singing. But no one heard him; for I myself could distinguish only the soft breathing of a song of his that was familiar to me. After a while the company, supposing that he was not quite ready to begin, commenced talking again. The bard sang on, and the song was finished; but few beside myself at all suspected that he had been singing, most supposing at last that, for some reason, he had given up his intention. But his own soul had floated off upon his melody, and he had that sufficient reward which many a bard has,—the silent rapture of song. But I believe and hope he was convinced that we shared the pleasure with him.”

Percival's habit of abstraction early manifested itself. During his student days at New Haven he gave private instruction by way of eking out his income. It is related by one of the boys that he sometimes went to the poet's room to recite when the latter was so deeply engrossed in a book that he did not notice that any one

had entered; frequently the caller, noting his tutor's preoccupation, went away without Percival's knowing that he had been there.

Another acquaintance tells of the following circumstance: "Having seated himself at a desk one evening to commence a poem for a coming Society celebration, he was suddenly aroused by what seemed to him a large conflagration, illuminating the apartment. He started to the window, and found the morning breaking in the east. He had written all night, and his poem was finished at a single heat."

Referring to Percival's habit of carrying an accordion under his old blue camlet cloak, Mr. Charles Monson of New Haven some years ago related this incident:

"I met him one day in Mr. Augur's room thus equipped; and, as soon as it seemed to be convenient, he introduced his then favorite topic and proposed giving a touch of an old air which he had lately found. (He was inquisitive about old books containing musical notes of bygone days, or of distant lands, and he was delighted to pick up and to touch off ancient and rare little musical airs.) Drawing out his accordion, he leaned forward in the attitude and with the

movements as if he were playing, his throat at the same time swelling as in singing—but the motions were all. We were attracted by his intense expression, his sharp face, and delighted look, when he suddenly turned and asked how we liked it. Mr. Augur smiled, and I exclaimed, ‘Ha ! ha! why, Doctor, you have not uttered the first sound.’ ‘Why, did n’t you hear it?’ said he. The Doctor heard it undoubtedly; but it was only by the ear of his imagination.”

## VI

One early love affair Percival is known to have had. His fellow townsman, Dr. Samuel G. Goodrich, has told of it in his "Recollections of a Lifetime." Percival at this time had not attained his majority. "About this time he was frequently in the society of a beautiful and accomplished young lady of the neighborhood; he botanized with her in the fields, and poetized with her in the library, and at last he thought himself in love. Months thus ran pleasantly on, when one day he made up his mind to give her a delicate hint of his condition. He did so, I believe, in verse. The young lady replied in plain prose that she was engaged, and was speedily to be married! The poet came to the conclusion that this was a deceitful world, and wrote Byronic verses."

This story may be true, and it may not. If the former, then there were two love episodes

in the life of the poet. In his early manhood he became a tutor in the family of Dr. Neil of Philadelphia. The doctor's daughter was his pupil, and he promptly fell in love with her. "He was engaged in his customary instruction one day, when he accidentally touched her hand. This so overcame him that he blushed deeply, became confused, could not say a word, and finally left the room suddenly,—never to return."

From Philadelphia the poet went to New Haven and there posted a letter to the object of his passion, warmly declaring his feelings. A reply from a member of her family dashed his hopes:

"Your former pupil, though impressed with a grateful sense of the services she received from you, (which we always fully appreciated,) and feeling the esteem she believed due to your character and principles, never, I must candidly assure you, had a thought which could for a moment encourage the object you avow. Kindness for you and the dictates of duty prompt me to inform you at once that there are existing circumstances which must now and forever render such a desire unavailing."

Something of Percival's frame of mind at this time may be gathered from letters to a friend:

“A young lady whom I once taught, and loved too,” he wrote, “to whom I was so devoted that I am ashamed of it, and who, I am bold to say, owes the best part of her mind to me, has lately, I understand, been engaged to a young Episcopal clergyman,—so the black coat ran away with beauty. They make the devotees; they connect the love of God with the love of themselves, worm themselves into the affections by a sort of religious courtship, and finally steal them away from those frank and open and high-toned spirits who disdain to offer anything but their own naked merit. After all, what a silly thing it is to regret a woman!—dear sensibility, oh, la! those sighs, and tears, and glances, and whispers, that cheek of roses, and bosom of heaped-up lilies, and eye of diamond, and breath like the perfume of Arabia, what nonsense, and what stark lies, too, it begets at the pure effervescence of a pure heavenly spirit, and ends in—the straw! Why should young ladies be so anxious to [be married?] Every one wants a husband, and sets her cap for him as nicely as decency will allow, and some-

times more so. We call them, too,—angels,—but they are too heavy to fly. A little dress, and a little lisping and music and drawing, perhaps a blue stocking filled full of title-pages and technics. Is that unfair?’’

Evidently he answered the latter question himself, and in the affirmative, for shortly after he recurred to the subject in another letter:

“St. Pierre says, in his beautiful tale of *La Chaumière Indienne*, that the best thing in the world is a good wife. I have heard different opinions from married men. Some are not disposed to undervalue matrimony. They indeed speak of it as a homely sort of happiness compared with the bright visions of youth, but after all much better than single blessedness. I have heard others sneer at it and curse it. Either they or their wives were in the wrong, I believe, after all. St. Pierre was right, but the wife must be good and the husband too. Now, to speak seriously, it is time for me to marry, if I ever do. I am approaching the critical period when the world can call me ‘old bachelor.’ I will make an effort to keep that title from me. I have never yet seriously set about it, and really I should make but green work of it.

“Men have different motives for marrying. Some marry a fortune, some a housewife, some a nurse, others a family interest, others an imaginary mistress. For my part, I will marry a woman whom I can love sincerely, if not enthusiastically, and in whom I can rationally bespeak an intellectual companion. I have been influenced by certain feelings on this subject which perhaps are not common. In nothing have I so much regretted my poverty and want of energetic occupation as in this, that it prevented me from giving an asylum to some one who had no other claims upon me but her merit and affection. I once saw a beautiful girl who seemed to me amiable and intelligent from her physiognomy, but who was in obvious risk of a dangerous perversion. I tortured myself because I could not gain such an influence over her as to sway and form her mind and conduct, and because I could not give her those external advantages which she had a right to demand. Few would suppose me actuated by such motives; most would imagine that, like all the rest, I was actuated by feelings of selfish libertinism: but the days of early youth are gone by, and possibly I shall be compelled to live and die single.



“Perhaps you will think I am snivelling. If so, I stand reprovèd, and as Gibbie Girder says, what more can a man do than stand reprovèd?”

## VII

Percival's appearance invariably attracted attention. Dr. Erasmus D. North, who became in after years one of his staunchest friends, first knew him as a sophomore in Yale College. "He was in the College Chapel, standing up and facing me in the seat next forward, while Dr. Dwight was leading the devotions of the assembled students. His classical features, his blonde complexion, his large humid eyes with dilated pupils, the tear starting and then setting back into its well in the socket, his whole expression as of one who had no communion with those around him, attracted my notice and led me to inquire his name and character. Was that sensibility, were those starting tears, the external manifestation of the workings of his own mind, or rather of the strong passive impression produced by the speaker's grand and musical voice, with which he intoned his prayer?"

“An inexhaustible, undemonstrative, noiseless, passionless man, scarcely evident to you by physical qualities, and impressing you for the most part as a creature of pure intellect,” is the way Prof. Shepard described him. “His wardrobe was remarkably inexpensive, consisting of little more than a single plain suit, brown or gray, which he wore winter and summer, until it became threadbare. He never used boots; and his shoes, though carefully dusted, were never blacked. A most unpretending bow fastened his cravat of colored cambric. For many years his only outer garment was a brown camlet cloak, of very scanty proportions, thinly lined, and a meagre protection against winter. His hat was worn for years before being laid aside, and put you in mind of the prevailing mode by the law of contrast only. He was never seen with gloves, and rarely with an umbrella. The value of his entire wardrobe scarcely exceeded fifty dollars; yet he was always neat, and appeared unconscious of any peculiarity in his costume.”

His dress was always a little peculiar. In college, while others wore their hair long, he had his short; while others shaved, he allowed his

beard to grow; and throughout life he never blacked his shoes. In Wisconsin (he was 57 years old when he went to the then new state), he became known as "Old Stonebreaker."

"The most of us that knew Dr. Percival did not know him till he came to the West," said Col. E. A. Calkins at a memorial meeting of the Wisconsin Historical Society. "He was then far past his prime. He walked with his head bent, his eyes cast downward, and with slow and uncertain step. Those of our citizens who often saw him will not soon forget his aspect of poverty, almost of squalor—his tattered grey coat, his patched pants—the repairs of his own hands—and his weather-beaten glazed cap, with earpieces of sheepskin, the wooly side in."

The late Horace Rublee, editor of The Milwaukee Sentinel, frequently saw Percival at the state capital. He has thus described the poet: "In person Percival was somewhat below the medium height, and rather slight and frail. His countenance was indicative of his extreme sensitiveness and timidity; pale and almost bloodless; the eye blue, with an iris unusually large, and when kindled with animation, worthy of a poet; the nose rather prominent, slightly Roman in

outline, and finely chiseled; while the forehead, high, broad, and swelling out grandly at the temples, marked him as of the nobility of the intellect.

“In his dress he was eccentric. He seemed to withdraw himself as much as possible from all intercourse with his fellow men, and to surrender himself wholly to intellectual pursuits. During the winter that he spent in our city, he scarcely formed an acquaintance, and hardly one in fifty of our citizens knew him by sight.”

## VIII

Percival was poor, but he scorned charity. His biographer, Julius H. Ward,<sup>3</sup> relates that Professor Silliman, noticing that the cap Percival wore had become altogether too shabby, left word with a hatter of New Haven to present him with a new hat. In the most delicate manner the merchant said to him that any hat upon his shelves was at his service, but the poet turned on his heel in contempt.

One Thanksgiving day, when it was known that he must be suffering for the want of food, the janitor of the Hospital sent him a generous dinner. It remained at his door untouched.

A kinsman once paid him two dollars for information received from him. He had repeatedly refused to receive money; but it was slipped

3. For much information contained in this sketch I am indebted to Ward's "Life and Letters of J. G. Percival." Several anecdotes are taken from this source without change except such as was necessary to permit condensation.

into his hand as they parted, with the expectation that Percival would keep it. In a few days, however, the money was returned through one of the booksellers. He thought it was the sacred duty of the scholar to impart freely all the information he could, when applied to.

Concerning Percival's hermitage, his favorite resorts and library, the good people of New Haven manifested a keen interest in due proportion to the care that he took to avoid gratifying it. He detested prying curiosity. Percival at one time had rooms in the upper story of the State Hospital. Anybody seeking him there would pass up two flights of stairs. The entry door was tied by a rope, fastened on the inside, but a rap brought the recluse to the door. Here he would stand in the entry, no matter how long, but never asking a visitor to enter.

It is related that on a summer day a stranger, a showy gentleman with extra airs, had been escorting some ladies through the Hospital grounds, and then called on the janitor to show the party up to Percival's quarters. The janitor went with the strangers to the foot of the second flight of stairs, pointed to the door, and awaited the reception. The gentleman's signal-knock

was answered by the footsteps of the Doctor, who unloosened the fastening, and on opening the door, beheld the stranger and a lady on each arm.

“I am extremely happy,” said the eloquent intruder in a measured and pompous accent,—  
“I am extremely happy and rejoiced that I have the honor to address the poet Percival.”

“Boo,” responded the Doctor, instantly shutting the door and readjusting the fastening.

For other anecdotes concerning this curious phase of the poet’s eccentricities, a condensation of Mr. Ward’s account may properly be given here:

“It was only by some ingenious artifice that the inside of his rooms was ever seen. A young physician, who was in attendance at the Hospital, attempted it and succeeded. The poet had a woodpile in the rear of the building, and would often go out to cut his wood. The physician, observing him there one day, went out and without a word began to split his wood. In a few days the friendly act was repeated, but not a word was exchanged; and so for some time Percival found assistance in preparing his fuel. One day his new-made friend proposed to carry



it up to his room. The offer was at first refused, then accepted; but he would allow the wood to be brought no further than the door. Again it was repeated, and the young doctor, as if in forgetfulness, followed the poet into his hermitage, took a hasty glance and retired in silence.

“His greatest difficulty while residing here came from the curiosity of women, who were always eying him as he went to and from his rooms. There was one in particular, an unmarried woman as singular as he was, who had taken rooms near his own, and who was obliged to make use of the same hall. She gave him great annoyance. He was fond of being out in the night; his hours were never regular; and this ancient dame was also fond of walking in the darkness up and down the long corridor. He would often see her as a dimly visible ghost in the distance, or she would unexpectedly confront him in daytime in the hall, muttering to herself, but never speaking to him. He was afraid of her, and came one day in great agitation to Dr. Jewett, whom he always consulted when in any trouble, setting forth her freaks and asking what he could do. The Doctor, with cool audacity, advised him to marry her, and that ended the

matter. It should be added, however, that his rooms were afterwards partitioned off so that he could have an entrance through the steward's apartments."

Percival's movements were often inexplicable. He would go away for a week at a time, no one knew where, often returning in the middle of the night. Mr. Sheldon Moore, his life-long friend, attributed his peculiarities of housekeeping to his dire poverty. Too poor to board, he kept bachelor's hall. His living was exceedingly plain and simple. He used to go to the stores in the evening to buy crackers, herrings, dried-beef, fruit, and other food which could be easily prepared; and as his health was often miserable, it was no unusual thing for him to go whole days without food. His personal expenses were in this way reduced to a minimum; and as he had his rooms for a nominal sum, he could live almost upon nothing. This explains why he could subsist so many years with no other means of support than the chance jobs of scientific or literary work which came to him.

Some particulars of Percival's hermit life became known in after years through the physician who had charge of the Hospital where Percival

had his quarters. He was present when the rooms were opened after Percival had left them, and knew more of his habits at this time than any other person. Percival had three rooms. His library and minerals were in one, his study in another, his bedroom in another. His bed was simply a cot, with mattress above. There were no sheets, and a block of wood placed under the mattress served for a pillow. Places at the foot showed that he had laid down with his shoes on, and it was evident that he had often slept in his clothes. The rooms were very untidy, and probably never swept. There were perhaps two inches of rolling lint upon the floor. There was a beaten path from his bed to his stove, to his writing-table, to his library, and to the door.

The clerk in Hezekiah Howe's bookstore, New Haven, who carried books by the bundle to Percival's lodgings in Broadway, where he lived alone and in seclusion for some years, relates that "upon no occasion would he permit books to be brought to him except in the night season; and no light was allowed. Indeed, it was said that no one entered the building except myself, who had the privilege of carrying up his books. It was known that after providing scant-

ily for his own subsistence the remainder of his means was devoted to the purchase of books, and even a considerable debt was contracted and a mortgage of his books was made, which was not removed until the settlement of his estate after his death."

The few years that Percival spent in Wisconsin were uneventful, but he was as eccentric as ever. One instance, related by the late Lyman C. Draper, secretary of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, will serve to illustrate: "He wanted a quiet boarding place. There was then a widow residing here who had been many years a successful teacher of young ladies, and had a high admiration of Dr. Percival and his poetry. She kept a few boarders, and he went there. One day the lady happened to dress her little boy in his presence. It so shocked him that he immediately left and chose a new home."

## IX

As a philologist Percival was the most remarkable man of his generation. Self-taught, he was conversant with the literature, in the original, of every country of Europe. Many of the dialects he mastered sufficiently to employ in writing poetry. When Olé Bull landed in this country, Percival greeted him with a poem written in Danish. Percival's last printed poem was written in German. Prof. Shepard says that he is known to have written verse in thirteen different languages; he imitated all the Greek and German meters, amusing himself in 1823 with rendering select passages from Homer in English hexameters, with the encouraging approbation of Prof. Kingsley. In the 40's he printed a series of excerpts from the three leading groups of European languages—the Slavonic, the German, the Romanic. Each of these groups embraces four languages: the Slavonic—Polish, Russian,

Servian, Bohemian; the Germanic—German, Low Dutch, Danish, Swedish; the Romanic—Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French.

Material assistance was given by Percival to Dr. Webster in the editorial work connected with the publication of the great dictionary that bears the name of the latter. Percival engaged to correct the proofsheets, but speedily his great scholarship in etymologies and the scientific bearing of words caused his work to be greatly amplified. It amounted in fact to correcting and editing of the manuscript. He was so painstaking and so tenacious in upholding his opinions that eventually a serious disagreement between the lexicographer and himself led to his retirement. He was evidently glad to break the connection, for the labor had become onerous and distasteful.

“My situation is one of disgust and toil,” he wrote to a friend in December, 1827. “As I find it, I appear to be obliged to correct the blunders of ignorance. I feel like the living tied to the dead.”

In the original edition of Webster's Dictionary, published in two volumes in 1828, due credit is given to Percival for his editorial work.

This disposes of the oft-repeated story that Noah Webster ignored Percival's assistance through motives of jealousy.

## X

Had Percival lived a few years longer, doubtless he would have made New Haven his home once more, for it was there that he caused to be built that strangely-planned house that seemed rather suited to be a monastic cell than a residence. Nathaniel Parker Willis thus described the place: "New Haven is a vast cathedral, with aisles for streets. Percival, the poet, I fancy has felt this in designing the cottage. It looks like a sarcophagus in a cathedral aisle. Three blind windows on the front of a square structure are the only signs of anything ever going in or coming out of it, the door being in the rear, I believe, and no sign of life visible in the streets. I felt my heart kneel in passing. He (Percival) is, I am sure, the purest and most mere man of genius possible to our race. When his struggling spirit shakes off this little hindrance to his wings,—the visible shape by which we



know him,—the ashes might properly be preserved in the sarcophagus he here built and pre-tenanted.”

Percival never occupied the house which he had planned for his old age. He died in Hazel Green, Wis., and there his grave remained unmarked for many years. Finally, an admirer in Connecticut interested himself in the matter, secured \$500 by subscription, and a monument was erected over the grave. It bears this inscription:

JAMES GATES PERCIVAL

born in

BERLIN CONNECTICUT

September 15 1795

Graduated at Yale College

B A 1815 M D 1820

State Geologist

of

CONNECTICUT 1835 1842

State Geologist

of

WISCONSIN 1854 1856

Died in HAZEL GREEN

May 2 1856

EMINENT AS A POET

RARELY ACCOMPLISHED AS A

LINGUIST

LEARNED AND ACUTE IN SCIENCE

A MAN WITHOUT GUILF

## XI

In 1828, George P. Morris planned to publish in his *New York Mirror* "the likenesses of nine living American poets." Percival's occupied the center of the group. His associates were Bryant, Sprague, Pierpont, Irving, Woodworth, Brooks, Pinckney and Halleck—these being then regarded as the most promising American poets. Such is the curious caprice of fame.

Portraits of Percival are few. The Wisconsin State Historical Society possesses an oil painting by Geo. A. Flagg. It was painted in New Haven about 1831, when the poet was in the prime of life. Prof. S. F. B. Morse painted his portrait in 1823, and Francis Alexander in 1825, but both of these paintings seem to have disappeared. A steel engraving is prefixed to the first volume of the blue-and-gold edition of his poems. A process etching from a photographic copy of the Flagg painting appears in

“Leading Events of Wisconsin History” (Milwaukee, 1897). In Goodrich’s “Recollections of a Lifetime” is given what purports to be a youthful representation of the poet, standing bareheaded in the leafy woods. The same engraving appears in the first American edition of Charles Lamb’s poems (published in 1858); it was evidently made to do duty a second time, with a different label, by the thrifty publisher of Goodrich’s book of reminiscences. This grotesque caricature has been several times reproduced in newspapers. Duyckinck’s *Cyclopedia* has a portrait from a wood engraving.

The catalogue of the Gluck collection belonging to the Buffalo Library mentions a portrait engraved by H. W. Smith from a painting by Francis Alexander.

Percival’s books are now difficult to procure. The first edition and the three numbers of his “Clio” occasionally turn up at auction in New York or Boston, and bring prices that would have meant much to the needy poet had the sale occurred during his time. Others of his books also sell at a considerable premium over the original price. The rarest Percivaliana are the small geological pamphlets issued in Wisconsin; they

are practically unprocurable. They were issued in small editions.

The largest collection of Percival books is undoubtedly that owned by Mr. G. A. Sattig, of New Haven, whose generous aid has enabled the compilation which follows. Mr. John E. Burton, of Lake Geneva, also owns a considerable number of the books written and edited by Percival.

### POETICAL WORKS

#### ✧ Poems. New Haven, 1821.

18mo. Contains Part I of Prometheus, and Zamor, a tragedy which he rejected from his later volumes. This, Percival's first book, is thus described by Mrs. Louise Tuthill, at whose home Percival was a frequent visitor: "Such a volume! Poor Percival! He who so dearly loved Elzevirs, and all other splendid editions of books! Some of your readers may remember that small duodecimo, badly printed, on whity-brown paper, with its dingy yellow cover; its leaves all rough and ragged at the edges—a humble avant-coureur of the beautiful volumes of Percival's poems which have since, from time to time, been issued from the English and the American press."

The North American gave Percival's first book a handsome notice in the number for January, 1822. Edward Everett wrote the review. "The little volume which he has presented us," Everett wrote, "contains the marks of an inspiration more lofty and genuine than any similar collection of fugitive pieces which has come to our notice from a native bard."

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✧ Clio. By James G. Percival. No. 1. *Che sia fra i magnanimi pochi!*—PETRARCA. Charles-

ton: Published by S. Babcock & Co. C. C. Sebring, Printer, 1822.

12mo., 108 pp. Percival went to Charleston in the latter part of the year 1821. Some of the best verses written by him were the fruits of his enforced leisure in that city. His *Coral Grove* and poems alluding to the sea were written there and were published in the *Charleston Courier*. In those days Charleston was the pride of the Southern cities, and Percival was given a cordial greeting by its warmhearted people. The Babcocks, who published his *Clio*, were former residents of New Haven. The volume brought Percival reputation, but did not assist him financially. Failing to earn sufficient income for his support, Percival left his Southern friends in March, 1822.

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\* *Clio*. By James G. Percival. No. 2. *Qui ne sait se borner, ne sut jamais écrire.*—BOILEAU. New-Haven: Printed and published by S. Converse, 1822.

12mo. 132 pp. As with the first *Clio*, the circulation of the second part was limited. An appreciative review, written by Dr. Samuel Gilman, appeared in the *North American* for January, 1823.

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*Prometheus, Part II, and other Poems.* New Haven, 1822.

18mo. One thousand copies were printed of this brochure of 108 pages. The poet Whittier wrote of the leading poem in 1830, in the *New England Weekly Review*: "His *Prometheus* is a noble poem. There is no affectedness about it; all is grand and darkly majestic. It has few soft and delicate passages, no tinge of the common love-poetry of the day. . . . He left such things to the dandies in literature—to our love-sick and moon-struck race of rhymers, and went forth in the dignity and power of a man to grapple with the dark thoughts which thronged before him, moulding them into visible and tangible realities. The

apostrophe to the sun, in this poem, we have ever looked upon as the most magnificent specimen of American poetry within our knowledge."

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✕ Poems, by James G. Percival. New York: Charles Wiley, 3 Wall Street. Wm. Grattan, Printer, 1823.

8vo. 396 pp. This volume has a curious history. Mr. Charles Wiley was at this time one of the chief literary magnates of New York. "In the rear of his store the choice litterateurs of the day had a sort of club-room, where they often met for the interchange of literary and social life. Here Cooper and Bryant and Stone and Goodrich were often seen; and here they suggested to Wiley the publication of Percival's poetry in a form befitting such brilliant productions. To this Wiley consented, and they at once drew up a contract. The volume was to be an octavo of about four hundred pages, published 'in a style equal to the Sketch-Book in all respects,' to be bound in boards, and to sell for three dollars per volume. The edition was to be one of seven hundred and fifty copies. Wiley engaged a room for Percival, and he was to remain in town while the work was passing through the press."

Percival gathered his manuscripts together and repaired to New York to supervise the publication. He tarried but briefly. "His room smoked, and the Frenchmen in an adjoining room kept up a continual playing upon the violin." Percival left. His sudden and unexplained disappearance surprised the friends who had interested themselves in his behalf, among them Col. W. L. Stone. In letters sent by Percival to friends, he writes in disgust of New York: "That city is completely Gothamized in my sight." He was at this time in painfully reduced circumstances. "I shall write you a letter on coarse paper, because I have no better, and have nothing wherewith to buy any better," he wrote to James Lawrence Yvonnet. "I am absolutely without a cent. . . . I am now compelled to sell myself as a weekly laborer to the assignees of the paper [The New Haven Herald] for a mere living. I am absolutely reduced as low as a man of talents can

be. . . . I am goaded to that state of irritation where a little excitement might upset the balance."

In some of his letters Percival is very bitter relative to his dealings with Wiley. Col. Stone's efforts to bring about harmony between publisher and poet finally succeeded, and the volume came from the press in November, 1823.

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Poems, by James G. Percival, M. D. Vol. 1 and 2. London: John Miller, 5, New-Bridge Street, Blackfriars, 1824.

8vo. pp. 257 and 272. The publication in England of Percival's poems was brought about through the efforts of Dr. Goodrich. The publisher lost one hundred pounds sterling by this venture.

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A Poem, "The Mind", delivered before the Connecticut Phi Beta Kappa Society, September 13, 1825. New Haven, 1825.

8vo. Few copies of this poem were sold. In the March number of the United States Review for 1826, William Cullen Bryant praises it as "a production of singular beauty." Henry Ware, Jr., printed a severe criticism of the poem in the North American Review for April, 1826.

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Poem, delivered before the Connecticut Alpha of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, September 13, 1825, by James G. Percival. Published at the request of the Society. Boston: Published by Richardson and Lord, Washington Street. Press of the North American Review. W. L. Lewis, printer, 1826.

12mo. pp. 40.

✧ Clio. By James G. Percival. No. 3. *Quæ tantæ tenuere moræ?* G. and C. Carvill, New York. Elliott & Palmer, print. 1827.

12mo. pp. 204. This volume failed to meet the approbation of magazine critics, the *Southern Review* for May, 1828, being especially caustic in its comments. The December, 1827, *American Quarterly* reviews the third *Clio* at great length.

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✧ The Dream of a Day, and Other Poems, by James G. Percival. New Haven: Printed and published by S. Babcock, 121 Chapel Street, 1843.

12mo. pp. 264. These poems introduce a great variety of measures—more than one hundred and fifty different forms or modifications of stanza. Sixteen years had elapsed since the publication of Percival's last volume, when his *Dream of a Day* appeared. The book received brief mention in the *Knickerbocker*, *Graham's Magazine* and the *North American Review*, and more extended notice in the *Democratic Review* for April, 1844, and in the *New York Evangelist*.

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Poems. New Haven, 1851.

18mo. pp. 346.

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✧ The Poetical Works of James Gates Percival. With a biographical sketch; in two volumes. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1859.

16mo. pp. 402-517; portrait. Blue and gold edition. The biographical sketch was written by S. W. Fitch.

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Percival left in manuscript a volume of *Studies in Verse*, which according to the preface written



by himself comprised "a series of attempts at imitating the verse of different languages." The poems are in imitation of verse in the following languages: Sanscrit, Persian, Arabic, Greek, Italian, French, German, Gaelic, Welsh, Danish, Swedish, Scottish, Norse, Flemish, Finnish, Bohemian, Servian, Russian. "In the specimens here given," he says in his preface, "I have endeavored to catch something of the form, color and spirit of the poetry of the different languages."

Percival was a frequent contributor to the United States Literary Gazette. He also contributed to numerous gift books and annuals, and specimens of his poetry appear in many compilations and in every American anthology printed within the last forty years.

#### SHEET MUSIC

Lines to be sung at the meeting of the Yale College Association of Alumni, August 17, 1842. Words by Doctor Percival. Tune—Lenox.

1 leaf. n. p. n .d.

The Carrier Pigeon, as sung with unbounded applause by Mrs. Holman at the New York Theater. The words by the American Bard,

Percival, the music by P. K. Moran. Published by E. W. Jackson, No. 44 Market St., Boston.  
3 pp. n. d.

#### SONG BOOK

New Haven Whig Song Book. [1840]

Published by the Whig General Committee for the use of the New Haven County Mass Convention, which was held on Thursday, Oct. 8, 1840.

#### GEOLOGICAL REPORTS

Report on the Geology of the State of Connecticut, by James G. Percival. Published under the direction of the Commissioners appointed by the Legislature. New Haven: Osborn and Baldwin, printers. 1842.

8vo. 495 pp. Map.

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Geological Reports on the Middletown, (N. Y.) Silver Lead Mines. New York, 1853.

8vo. J. G. Percival was assisted by W. H. Stevens.

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Report on the Kensington Lead Mines, Berlin, Conn. New Haven, 1853.

8vo.

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Report on the Iron of Dodge and Washington Counties, Wisconsin. Milwaukee, 1855.

8vo. Plate.

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Annual Report on the Geological Survey of

the State of Wisconsin, by James G. Percival.  
Madison: Beriah Brown, printer, 1855.

12mo. 101 pp.

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Annual Report on the Geological Survey of  
the State of Wisconsin, by James G. Percival.  
Madison: Calkins and Proudfit, printers, 1856.

12mo.

#### MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS

\* Physiological and Chemical Researches on the  
Use of Prussic Acid, by F. Magendie. New  
Haven, 1820.

12mo. A translation.

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Oration delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa  
Society of Connecticut, Sept. 10, 1822, on  
some of the moral and poetical Truths derivable  
from the Study of History. New Haven, 1822.

8vo.

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Elegant Extracts: in Prose, Poetry, and Epis-  
tles, originally compiled by V. Knox; new edi-  
tion, prepared by James G. Percival. Boston.  
(1826)

8vo. 6 vols.

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\* A Geographical View of the World, embrac-  
ing the Manners, Customs and Pursuits of every

Nation; founded on the best authorities. By Rev. J. Goldsmith. Revised, corrected and improved by James G. Percival, M. D. New York, 1826.

Second American edition published by D. F. Robinson & Co., Hartford, 1833.

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A System of Universal Geography, with a Description of all Parts of the World, on a new plan according to the great Natural Divisions of the Globe, accompanied with analytical, synoptical and elementary tables by M. Malte-Brun, editor of the "Annales des Voyages," etc. With Additions and Corrections by James G. Percival. In three volumes. Boston: Printed and published by Samuel Walker, 1834.

4to. pp. 640, 680, 714. A second edition was printed in 1844-45.

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The Wonders of the World; comprising the most remarkable Curiosities of Nature and Art described according to the latest Authorities, and illustrated by engravings, by the Rev. C. C. Clarke. A new edition, revised and corrected by James G. Percival. New Haven: Printed and published by S. Babcock. [1836]

8vo. 624 pp.

In 1827 Percival assisted in compiling Web-

ster's Dictionary; he also assisted in the thorough revision of Dr. Goodrich's edition of Webster's Dictionary, twenty years later.

#### BOOK AND MAGAZINE REFERENCES

The following are some of the principal references to Percival in books:

4 Bibliography. Stone's First Editions of American Authors, p. 155,

— Leon's First Editions of American Authors, p. 28.

4 — Foley's American Authors, p. 225.

Critical Estimate. Stedman's Poets of America, p. 38.

"Percival, the eccentric scholar and recluse, shines by virtue of a gift improved by no mean culture. His lyrics and poems of nature, though inferior to Bryant's, so resemble them that he would be called the latter's pupil, had not the two composed in the same manner from the outset."

— Richardson's American Literature, p. 29.

"When one has patiently read the eight hundred pages containing the poetical works of Percival, the chief of the Connecticut bards of the second generation, it is difficult to pay him even the relative praise that belongs to a pioneer. Percival repeatedly crosses, in the wrong direction, the line that separates the sublime from the ridiculous, the soulful from the sentimental."

— Venable's Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley, p. 271.

"From the 'Atlantic country' came the melody of Percival's Clio, the most celebrated poetry that had yet been

produced in America. 'Percival is' deservedly first of American bards', wrote the editor of the Cincinnati Literary Gazette in 1824."

— Whipple's Essays and Reviews, v. 1, p. 53.

Eulogies. Wis. Historical Colls., v. 3, p. 66.

Life and Letters of, by Julius H. Ward. Boston, 1866.

Manuscripts of. Descriptive Catalogue of the Gluck Collection of Manuscripts and Autographs in the Buffalo Public Library. Buffalo, 1899.

Satire, by "Lavante" on the Poets and Poetry of America, reprinted from the original, published in Philadelphia in 1847; with an introductory argument by Geoffrey Quarles to show that it was written by Edgar Allan Poe.

Written in the manner of Byron's English Bards and Scotch Reviewers. The Quarles reprint is dated 1887.

"Grave as the grave and more comical  
In solemn suit appears great Percival,  
A moonshine wit with something of the calf,  
A mooncalf clown, the hero of a laugh!  
Who Cobb and Webster tortures into rhyme  
Without one thought to fill the vacant time;  
To him all art, all argument, supremely flat  
Appear, like metaphysics to a cat;  
So like the mole, so fitted for the dark,  
The mental eye ne'er saw a mental spark!"

Selections from the poems of. American Sonnets. Boston, 1890.

- An American Anthology; edited by Stedman.  
Boston, 1900.
- Bryant's Library of Poetry and Song.
- Cambridge Book of Poetry.
- Fireside Encyclopedia of Poetry.
- Golden Leaves from the American Poets.  
New York, 1865.
- Griswold's Poets and Poetry of America.
- Harper's Cyclopedia of British and American  
Poetry.
- Poems of the Months. Boston.
- Poems of the Pilgrims. Boston, 1882.
- 'Round the World with the Poets. Boston.
- Three Centuries of Song; edited by Whittier.
- ✓ Sketch of. L. W. Fitch, introduction to col-  
lected poems, v. 1. Boston, 1859.
- ✓ — Allibone's Dictionary of Authors, v. 2.
- Duyckinck's Cyclopedia of American Litera-  
ture, v. 2. New York, 1866.
- Goodrich's Recollections of a Lifetime, chap-  
ter 36.

Excellent sketches of Percival were contributed to the Milwaukee Sentinel by Mr. John E. Burton, June 25, 1897; by Mrs. E. S. Martin. Feb. 5, 1899. Mr. Burton described a pilgrimage to the grave.

The following are the principal references to Percival in magazines:

- Percival, James G. (James Russell Lowell)  
 North American Review, v. 104, p. 278.  
 — (G. M. Beard) Hours at Home, v. 4, p. 243.  
 — (D. C. Gilman) Nation, v. 3, p. 346.  
 — (C. U. Shepard) Atlantic, v. 4, p. 59.  
 — Knickerbocker, v. 48, p. 89.  
 — New England Magazine, v. 2, p. 408.  
 — Living Age, v. 49, p. 735.  
 Classic Melodies. (E. D. North) New Eng-  
 lander, v. 2, p. 81.  
 Clio. American Quarterly, v. 2, p. 482.  
 — (S. Gilman) North American Review, v.  
 16, p. 102.  
 — Southern Review, v. 1, p. 442.  
 Early Poetry of. Southern Literary Messenger,  
 v. 24, p. 170.  
 Life and Character of. Christian Examiner, v.  
 67, p. 227.  
 Life and Letters of. (J. T. Tucker) Congrega-  
 tional Review, v. 7, p. 20.  
 Life and Poems of. (E. W. Robbins) New  
 Englander, v. 17, p. 400.  
 Phi Beta Kappa Oration. (H. Ware) North  
 American Review, v. 22, p. 317.  
 Poems. (Edward Everett) North American  
 Review, v. 14, p. 1.



- (J. H. Ward) North American Review, v. 91, p. 72.
- Democratic Review, v. 14, p. 365.
- Southern Quarterly, v. 5, p. 187.
- Christian Monthly Spectator, v. 4, p. 643.
- Monthly Review, v. 105, p. 315.
- Music, v. 5, p. 542.
- United States Literary Gazette, v. 1, p. 65.
- Prometheus. Christian Disciple, v. 5, p. 129.
- Recollections of. Putnam's Magazine, v. 8, p. 638.
- Ward's Life of. (T. Dwight) New Englander, v. 26, p. 303.

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